

## **Recollections: My Day in NYC on 9/11**

By Rebecca Patrick

*NOTE: A native Hoosier, I had moved to Connecticut three years prior to the 9/11 attacks and commuted daily to my job in New York City. These are my personal recollections, which I compiled leading up to the 10th anniversary.*

It still felt like summer and was such a bright day; those were my initial thoughts of Tuesday, September 11, 2001.

I was tired from coming home late Monday night from a trip to Cleveland. As I sat on the Metro train from Connecticut into Manhattan, my dark shades were firmly in place and I slept much of the 45-minute ride in. Later on, I would wonder if any of those people whom I only “knew” by their faces worked at the World Trade Center.

I made my way through Grand Central Station to the subway and to my office near Times Square; it was 8:45 a.m. My job was with a PR agency on Broadway Street that had many financial clients. That meant televisions were throughout our entire floor and routinely turned to the stock market updates and other news of the day.

I had barely gotten to my desk and booted up my computer when a co-worker hung up her phone, stood up and said to no one in particular but actually to everyone, “A plane has crashed into one of the Twin Towers.” As if on cue, “CNN Breaking News” came on our TVs confirming that very fact.

For some reason, I immediately sensed this was bad and going to get much worse. I don’t know why, but I did – even though I didn’t grasp exactly what was happening; no one did then.

Feeling that way and knowing my mother was a champion worrier – and all of my family was back in Indiana – I immediately called home. I got voicemail and told her that the World Trade Center was more than 30 blocks south of where I was and I was fine. I then called my aunt’s house and talked to her. Those were among the last phone calls anyone in my office was able to make. Soon flooding of the circuits and later the loss of phone infrastructure for the city (which was located in the Twin Towers) would isolate residents from the outside.

Despite my slight sense of doom, I was quite calm as was about everybody in my office, but that started to change over the next few moments.

Throughout the floor, people gathered around the TVs; some came up close to analyze what was happening while others of us simply stood and trained our eyes on the screen while standing at our cubicles.

Several of us started wondering aloud what type of plane it was that hit the North Tower. I thought to myself that it couldn’t be a very large one because wouldn’t that have taken the top of the tower off? Someone else actually verbalized this.



A guy who always seemed to know things – or at least thought he did – said that it had to be a large commercial jet for this reason and that reason. I’m not good at judging the scale of things and he seemed convincing. Then we began speculating how it got that close to the tower and repeating what a horrible accident this was.

The know-it-all guy interjected: “I don’t think it was an accident.”

The rest of us sort of froze – and tried to process what that meant.

It was still not yet 9:00 a.m. Meanwhile, there was some emotional turmoil quickly starting to filter throughout the office.

A co-worker who sat nearby (but worked in another group) was pulled out of a meeting and informed of what was going on. Her husband worked at Marsh & McLennan which occupied several of the top floors on the North Tower. Understandably, she was visibly upset and people were trying to comfort her.

Quietly, off to the right side, people were trying to count on the screen the number of floors to the impact of the plane. After the “math” was done, some swallowed hard; others covered their mouths or slowly shook their heads. If he had been at his office when the plane hit, it didn’t look good for her husband.

Then to my left was disbelief over a chance budget decision. There was a financial media conference that morning held at the Windows on the World restaurant atop the North Tower. We normally sent several people from our office to this event but had decided not to this time. One colleague who had gone to this meeting in prior years was worried about friends and business associates she knew were there.

There was hope that things would somehow turn out OK. (Only later did we learn how naïve that thought was for those trapped at the very peak of the structure.)

Our collective optimism rapidly started fading as a mere few minutes later we saw a fireball erupt out of the South Tower.

“What happened!” somebody yelled. People were pointing at the TV. The guy in the office with all the answers was once again ahead of the rest of us. He immediately said it was another plane – and that it flew right into it.

I thought he was nuts as did some others. The CNN broadcasters weren’t even saying this was another plane.

But as he pointed out, “What else is it then?” He said he saw something on the screen – a plane – fly into the building in real time. Again, as if prompted, CNN showed footage from another angle that left no doubt that it was a plane – and that the acts were intentional.

Slowly the recognition of what this meant began to sink in: New York City was under attack.

Many of us went to the windows that pointed south toward the World Trade Center. It was one thing seeing it on TV, but to then also look out your window and see it happening was completely surreal.

Monumental unease was officially setting in throughout the office.

My mind was playing what-ifs and drifting to my two recent visits to the Twin Towers complex in as many weeks: One for pleasure – shopping at the vast underground center – and the other a breakfast business meeting at the Marriott hotel, which sat between both towers and was connected to them.

We were all at once captivated and horrified at what we were seeing unfold. And, most immediately, concerned for our co-worker and her husband.

By now, the few who had been oddly steadfast in trying to get some work done finally grasped the situation; the entire office was fixated either on the TVs or looking outside. That was pretty much all we did for the next 55 minutes that followed the second tower attack. During that timeframe, I believe my co-worker left to meet up with family and await word on her husband.

I cannot say this strongly enough: It NEVER occurred to me that the towers would completely collapse. I don’t think it occurred to most people in the city and area that day either.

So when it happened to the South Tower, there were delayed gasps and shouts when the smoke cleared and only one tower remained.

Once the first tower was gone, that's when people in my office decided to leave – myself included. Common sense was that the North Tower was going to fall too.

In conjunction with that, we knew the Pentagon was hit and mere moments after that first tower collapsed, CNN announced that the Sears Tower in Chicago had been evacuated. Our office was situated between what were probably the city's other two most iconic fixtures, the Empire State Building and Times Square.

It felt like we were sitting ducks.

Many of us, though, depended on commuter trains to go to and from home. And no transportation was happening – everything was shut down. Still, we wanted out and away from our location.

I thought I would walk about 30 blocks north to one of my best friend's apartment in Uptown Manhattan. I was a frequent visitor and the staff knew me, so I could take refuge there no problem. My boss had designs on ducking into a hotel lobby or restaurant.

When we hit the street, there was a steady throng of people the likes of which I had never seen before in the city. Everyone was walking with purpose.

It was an eerily calm group overall – albeit a bit jumpy when we first heard the fleet of U.S. military jets above us that had descended on New York City to offer protection. The first time one whizzed, by people freaked out a little; but looked up and saw they were *our* planes and felt reassured.

Along the way, there were many TVs and radios on – some merchants even had put them outside so everyone could hear what was going on.

Not surprising given the number of people walking and everybody in sort of their own zone, my boss and I got separated. I learned that evening he found an establishment that had opened itself up to the masses and was serving complimentary drinks and snacks. Smart man.

Once inside my friend's apartment, I immediately turned on the TV and learned what I had assumed would have happened: The North Tower had collapsed too. The image of only lingering dust and debris where two buildings – so alive and full of people – used to sit made me sick to my stomach.

There were speculations that as many as 20,000-40,000 had been in the two towers at the time of the attacks. The question was how many made it out.

I sat down and took in the entire events from the day – the gravity of it all hitting now more than before. It wasn't too long before Mayor Rudy Giuliani addressed the city and the nation.

I had no real opinion of the man before – other than I considered him a typical New Yorker. But I'm not sure there's a greater example in the last 30-40 years of someone rising to the occasion and taking charge of a horrific situation.

Giuliani's words and demeanor were comforting in a way that no one else's could have been – not even the President's. The mayor had lived through it – narrowly, as he was in a building near Ground Zero – and this was *his* city. Giuliani made a person feel that as horrible as the events of the last few hours were, we would get through it.

It was near 6 p.m. before I tried to make my way to Grand Central Station and catch a train home to Connecticut.

The city I encountered after I left the apartment was a changed one. It was essentially a ghost town. During my 30-40 minute walk that spanned more than 30 blocks I saw one lone cab and only a handful of people.

As I approached Grand Central Station, which was closer to Lower Manhattan, I was met with a scene that gave me the tiniest glimpse into what those poor souls encountered at the World Trade Center complex and the immediate area surrounding it.

The air was gray, as dust and debris had drifted up from the site. My skin could feel pin-pricks against it from the particles. And the smell was uniquely horrible – a mix of burning fuel and metal, and things that shouldn't be burning. I had to take off my short-sleeved cardigan and cover my mouth with it the last few blocks.

Upon arrival at the station, it was immediately clear how things had changed. Armed soldiers flanked the main entrance and barriers were in place to keep a vehicle from dropping off passengers as had been commonplace. In subsequent days and weeks, these soldiers and tanks become the norm at various points throughout the city. And it provided great relief to have them there.

On my train ride to Connecticut, everyone was talking about the tragic events. Some people on board had actually worked at or near the Twin Towers. They were understandably a bit shaken but reassured us that the casualty total would not reach the 10,000 or more as feared on TV for several reasons. That made me feel some better and I held onto that belief when I got home. (This proved true as the official victim count at the World Trade Center was just under 3,000).

My office – like so many others in Manhattan – was closed for the entire week. Toward the end of that period, I received an all-staff email that my co-worker's husband perished along with all his colleagues who were in the office.

On early Saturday morning I returned to the city to go with my good friend to her parents' house on Long Island. I was struck by how quiet Manhattan still was. But the following Monday – nearly one week since the attacks – the new normal started as the city essentially reopened.

Grief counselors were made available at my office for those who needed talk about the events. For basically the rest of the year, the area in which I worked had an occasional bomb threat or anthrax scare. In my building alone, I recall being evacuated twice due to a “suspicious” package or bomb threat phoned in to police. My office was also visited by Hazmat workers when a white powder came in an envelope.

While it was admittedly a little unnerving, you sort of just got used to it. People are resilient, perhaps even defiantly so when they've been attacked out of the blue. The best way I can describe it is a feeling of withstanding the best shots someone had. That embodied what the city as a whole was like – despite the tragic and senseless loss of so many lives. You don't give in to terror.

Each year, when September rolls around, I find myself thinking about 9/11.

As sort of my own very small memorial, I keep a personal photo of the Twin Towers on display. For years it hung in my office in downtown Indianapolis, but now the image resides in my living room. This morning, I gave it an extra glance and a soft touch of the frame before leaving.

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